

Silvio Berlusconi's party of only children:
The organizational model of Forza Italia

CLAUDIA MARIOTTI



Universidad
Carlos III de Madrid

IPOLGOB
Instituto de Política y Gobernanza

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Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
Departamento de Ciencia Política y Sociología
Campus de Getafe
Calle Madrid, nº 126
28903 MADRID
Tfno.: 916245821 – Fax: 916249574
Correo electrónico: politicaygestion@uc3m.es

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**SILVIO BERLUSCONI’S PARTY OF ONLY CHILDREN: THE
ORGANIZATIONAL MODEL OF FORZA ITALIA***

CLAUDIA MARIOTTI**

Abstract: Since it was founded in 1994, Silvio Berlusconi’s party, “Forza Italia”, turned over the traditional shape of the Italian political system. Its structure doesn’t fit any of the classifications which have been created from the time of Duverger on, except perhaps for Angelo Panebianco’s definition (1982) of charismatic party. The object of the paper is the parliamentary class of Forza Italia, which can be almost totally overlapped to the party class, differently from what happened in mass ideological parties. This overlap has two main reasons: the gain for the party in having its executives paid directly from public institutions, and

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** Dipartimento di Istituzioni Pubbliche, Economia e Società Università degli Studi di Roma Tre, Rome (Italy)

above all – the degree of control that the party leader achieves, having the power to choose the candidates and - as a result - a huge direct power on the party structure itself, making party statutes actually ineffective. The research, conducted by interviewing 50 members of the Parliament of Forza Italia with the methods of vignettes and open interviews, tries to explain the power relationships between party executives, members of the Parliament and the leader.

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Introduction

For over forty years, political science international literature dealt with the rapid transformations of mass political parties, from Kirchheimer's reflections (1966) on the tendency of parties to de-ideologize their programs, eager to represent ampler and heterogeneous segments of electorate ("catch-all parties"), to Katz and Mair's study (1994; recently verified, for Italy, in Bardi, Ignazi and Massari 2007) about the increasing power which – in current organizational structures – has been reached by central apparatuses and by parliamentary groups and elected officials at different governmental levels.

On the one hand, we can assist to a decline of parties which are territory-rooted and permanently present locally (element confirmed in many countries by the constant decrease in the number of party members, of intermediate level party leaders and local offices); on the other hand most of financial and human resources tend to concentrate towards the central support of institutional activities and to mobilize publicly especially during electoral campaigns, with a massive use of mass-media.

These phenomena, which can be found in most of consolidated democracies, present sure peculiarities in the Italian case.

In fact, the political crisis of 1992-1994 brought firstly to the collapse and fragmentation of traditional political parties, particularly those with governing responsibilities, and secondly it caused a process of adaptation, re-allocation and aggregation of old and new political groups inside an approximately bipolar scheme, favored, in all institutional, national and local contexts, by the dynamics of the new electoral systems.

After fifteen years of "transition", characterized by this "fragmentary bipolarism", the recent evolution of the political system seems to proceed, though not always coherently and linearly, towards a prevailing bipartitism, design supported by major political actors and embodied by the unification of the main parties of the two sides respectively in two new political subjects: the Partito Democratico (born in 2007) and Popolo della Libertà (created formally in March 2009).

The method of the research

The considerations expressed in this paper are the fruit of a research conducted with face-to-face interviews on 50 members of Italian Parliament of the XV legislature, all belonging to the party Forza Italia.

The interview was composed of two parts. In the first we used the method of vignettes¹, in order to investigate the value options of interviewees, bypassing the problem of social desirability of the answers (see Mariotti 2008 and 2010). In the second part we submitted in-depth interviews concerning the loyalty relationship that interviewees had with the party and with the leader, the dynamics of candidates selection, the expectations and the critical aspects of their experience in Forza Italia.

This paper makes reference to the second part of in-depth interviews.

Historical overview

Forza Italia represents a true novelty in Italian and international political panorama.

Founded officially on January 18th 1994², Forza Italia originally meant to be just the opposite of the traditional model of mass party. A slim structure, based on the strength of the leader (Silvio Berlusconi), and a corporate mindset akin to that of Fininvest (Berlusconi's corporation, which provided fundamental organizational resources to the establishment and consolidation of Forza Italia³) are

¹ Vignettes are short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond. This technique allows to elicit perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes from responses or comments to stories depicting scenarios and situations. The investigated value dimensions for the research have been universalism/particularism, entrepreneurial attitude and, above all, Madisonian/populist conception of democracy. The results have been reported and analyzed in a data matrix.

² That is the day in which the constitutive act and the Statute of the party were signed in Rome (in via S. Maria dell'Anima 31/A, Berlusconi's house in Rome) in front of notary Francesco Colistra.

³ Berlusconi's corporations – among which Fininvest and particularly the advertising branch Publitalia – have been an organizational resource of vital importance for Forza Italia, which has been able to present itself as brand new, as a non-party with a breaking-through profile able to assert itself in the fragile Italian political system. Berlusconi's corporations, including more than 300 companies and producing huge amounts of profits, operate in seven macro-

among the main features of this party, and make it different from all types and classes of parties elaborated in political analysis up to then to describe these organizations (Duverger 1951).

It's not casual that most of the highest executives of the party-movement (at the beginning, in fact, Forza Italia was presented as a movement, precisely to highlight the strong anti-party character) came from Fininvest (see Lanza and Piazza 2002) or were close anyway to Berlusconi's companies. Beginning with the foundation in Milan, in September 1993, of the association "Alla Ricerca del Buongoverno" (meaning "looking for Good Government") by Giuliano Urbani, political analyst and commentator for «Il Giornale», Berlusconi's family's newspaper.

The party founded by Berlusconi has been the first European experiment of political organization stemming from a private commercial enterprise, and that is why it has been defined for a long time as "partito-azienda" (corporate party).

The electoral success in 1994 which brought Berlusconi to be Italy's Prime Minister and the following failure of the strategy of alliances (particularly with Lega Nord), which led to the fall of government and put Forza Italia in the opposition side, compelled to rethink and reorganize the structure of the movement-party.

At the end of 1994 a process of restructuration began, promoted by the national coordinator of the time, Cesare Previti, in order to face the organizational lacks emerged during the previous governing experience. The new Statute, approved in October 1994, provided a more structured organization at the local level in comparison to the previous Statute. However, Forza Italia continued to have a slim structure and a concentration of functions at the top of the party (the President).

The defeat of 1996 elections marked the failure of Previti's model of "militants party", model which had not been able neither to reduce the internal democracy deficit (goal pursued just lukewarmly, not being considered a priority

areas: Communication, which is composed by TV (Mediaset), cinema (Medusa production and distribution) and advertising (Publitalia 80); Publishing (Mondadori, Einaudi, Sperling & Kupfer); Distribution; Insurance and Financial Services (Mediolanum and Programma Italia); Real Estate (Edilnord 2000, sold to Pirelli & C. Real Estate in 2001); Sport (soccer team A.C. Milan) and Group Services. See Poli 2001.

by the leader himself), nor to create a structure which could support the leader in the selection of a political class for the national and – above all – local level.

Romano Prodi's success in 1996 political elections (at the head of a center-left coalition) represented a crucial turning-point in the history of Forza Italia. In fact, Berlusconi entrusted the new national coordinator, Claudio Scajola, with the task of writing a new Statute in order to give the party a more solid organization.

With the new Statute (January 1997), though, Forza Italia maintained two features of the original model: personalization of the leadership and the elections-oriented strategy.

Between 1996 and 2001, years in which the party remained in the opposition, all Forza Italia's members of Parliament were given a role inside the party, beginning with the policy departments.

Also profiting from being at the opposition, these "Parliamentarian executives" spent much of their efforts in creating and developing many of the new structures of the party.

When in 2001 Forza Italia won the elections again, obtaining a resounding victory – also thanks to an efficient use of mass-media – almost everybody who had a role in the party was called to run governmental positions at different levels. In those years, as a consequence, the party institutionalization "frozen", mainly because of the substantial overlap which existed between party executives and Parliamentary class.

In 2006, Berlusconi's coalition lost elections for a bunch of votes, and began a very hard opposition to the weak Prodi's governing coalition.

As well as in previous opposition periods, Berlusconi dedicated himself to the party. A phase of big change started through two strategies: on the one hand, Sandro Bondi⁴, new national coordinator, ran the membership campaign and promoted the organization of several local conventions; on the other hand, Michela Vittoria Brambilla⁵ – new face of the party and overtly supported by Berlusconi himself – managed the Circoli della Libertà ("Clubs of Freedom"), aimed to be a movement not formally bound to Forza Italia, but inspired and directly tied to Berlusconi.

⁴ Current Italian Minister for Cultural Activities since May 8th 2008.

⁵ Current Italian Minister of Tourism since May 8th 2009.

In a decisive moment for Italian politics, Berlusconi chose to enhance this last organizational dimension for his party, basing mostly on it the creation of the new political subject, named Popolo della Libertà ("People of Freedom"), the PDL. PDL's birth could be considered as the realization of a project defined long time before by Berlusconi.

"All'inizio eravamo un partito essenzialmente giustizialista, poi gradualmente siamo diventati il pentapartito, poi, entrando nel Partito Popolare Europeo, c'è stato un ulteriore cambiamento. Ora ci si appresta a fare il Partito della Libertà e questo è possibile proprio perché la sintesi di tutto è comunque il leader. [...] La costruzione a destra di un partito liberal-democratico è stato l'obiettivo di Berlusconi fin dal 1994".⁶
[a Member of Parliament, March 2007]

What in newspapers was called the "running board revolution"⁷ was not a sudden action by a leader looking for the attention of the media, but a long-studied plan defined by Berlusconi in all details.

"Adesso è importante dare vita a questa nuova creatura che sarà la protagonista della libertà e della democrazia nei prossimi decenni [...] saremo lieti di poter trovare per il nostro paese una direzione di svolta che assicuri la democrazia, la libertà [...] partito del popolo della libertà, Popolo della Libertà"⁸
[from Berlusconi's "speech of the running board", Milan, November 18th 2007]

⁶ "At the beginning we were essentially a 'justicialist' party, then we gradually became the 'pentapartito' [the reference is to the group of five parties, majority of the Parliament during the 1980s: they were Socialists, Christian Democrats, Liberals, Republicans and Social Democrats], then, entering the European Popular Party, a further change occurred. Now we are going to make the Party of Freedom, and that is possible just because the synthesis of everything is the leader. [...] Building a liberal-democratic party on the right was Berlusconi's objective since 1994".

⁷ The reference is to the fact that the new political subject was announced publicly for the first time on November 18th 2007 by Berlusconi, who was giving a quick speech in Milan, in piazza San Babila, standing on the running board of his car.

⁸ "Now it's important to give the life to this new creature, which is going to be a protagonist of freedom and democracy in next decades. [...] We'll be happy to find for our country a changing direction which ensures democracy, freedom [...]. Party of the People of Freedom, People of Freedom".

Berlusconi himself, actually, had anticipated the will to create the new party on December 2nd 2006, in piazza San Giovanni in Rome.

“Siamo qui per mandare a casa il governo Prodi. Siamo qui per impedire alle sinistre di impoverire materialmente e moralmente l’Italia. Siamo qui per guardare al futuro per un nuovo grande partito della libertà. Noi siamo il popolo della libertà, noi crediamo in un sogno, in una prospettiva che può essere garantita solo con la realizzazione del nostro programma liberale fondato sui nostri valori di libertà. Nostri, perché non appartengono a un solo partito, nostri perché tutti insieme ci crediamo, nostri perché noi tutti insieme abbiamo voglia di cambiare questo Paese, di riprendere il cammino delle riforme e della crescita. Noi qui oggi, siamo il partito unitario del centro-destra, siamo già il partito della libertà”⁹

[Berlusconi’s speech, Rome, December 2nd 2006]

The Popolo della Libertà was constituted as a federation of political parties on February 27th 2008. The foundational congress has been held at Fiera di Roma (Rome) on March 29th 2009.

The PDL – defined a “movement” by Berlusconi and which does not have the word “party” in its name, so stressing semantically and symbolically the distance from old traditional parties – put together the main political forces of Center-Right: Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, la Destra and other minor groups¹⁰ of Christian Democratic, liberal, social-democratic, centrist and right-winged inspiration; at the beginning of XVI legislature they formed a single Parliamentary Group.

Today the PDL, which won the political elections of 2008, has the government of the country and a solid Parliamentary majority. Nonetheless,

⁹ “We’re here to send Prodi’s government back home. We’re here to prevent the Lefts to impoverish Italy materially and morally. We’re here to look at the future to a new great party of freedom. We are the People of Freedom, we believe in a dream, in a vision which can be ensured only realizing our liberal program, founded on our values of freedom. Ours, because they don’t belong to a single party, ours because we believe it all together, ours because we all together want to change this country, to regain the path of reforms and of growth. We, here today, are the unitary center-right party, we already are the Party of Freedom”.

¹⁰ Democrazia cristiana per le Autonomie, Nuovo Psi, Popolari italiani, Azione sociale, Riformatori liberali, Partito repubblicano italiano, Circolo delle Libertà, Il Circolo del buon governo, Destra libertaria, Cristiano Popolari, Italiani nel Mondo.

despite the big consent obtained in the 2008 ballot, several questions and doubts over the future of this party remain.

Forza Italia: the party of the only children

Reviewing carefully political science literature on Forza Italia, it emerges that Berlusconi's party has been object of several definitions in last 16 years.

At the beginning it was considered a "flash party", because of its sudden and unexpected appearing on the political scene, and also because of the absence of structures characteristic of traditional mass parties.

Forza Italia in 1994 was considered as an impact phenomenon, but absolutely temporary, destined to disappear shortly after – as a weak and evanescent political group lasting just for a legislature – without affecting Italian political system, similarly to the post-World War II experience of L'Uomo Qualunque¹¹.

Despite all the skepticisms of experts and analysts, in March 1994 Berlusconi's party won the elections, reaching the government of the country. This fact of fundamental importance compelled the political arena to reevaluate Berlusconi's project, which, nonetheless, kept to be underestimated.

In fact, Forza Italia was still considered a "virtual party" (McCarthy 1995), a "ghost party" (Bobbio 1994), a "personal patrimonial party" (Maraffi 1995), also taking into account the fragility which manifested itself at the end of 1994 (particularly with the failure in administrative elections of November).

The definition then deemed most appropriate was "corporate party", referring to the slim structure of the party, concentrated on the role of its leader and featuring an ideological culture similar to that of Berlusconi's corporation, Fininvest, which in those years represented Forza Italia's main resource. Berlusconi

¹¹ L'Uomo Qualunque was a political party, created between 1944 and 1945 around a magazine and a vaster social movement, led by Guglielmo Giannini. Its strong opposition to the system of parties (that is the origin of the word "qualunquism", indicating a hard distrust towards political parties, considered just as groups of power-seeking individuals) brought to a quick end of that experience.

referred just to his companies, particularly to Publitalia '80¹² (run by Marcello Dell'Utri), in order to design and manage the electoral campaigns and to select the candidates for the elections.

*"Publitalia non ha contribuito alla campagna elettorale di Forza Italia: Publitalia ha fatto la campagna elettorale e ha creato dal nulla il più forte partito italiano"*¹³

[Marcello Dell'Utri, in an interview during the annual convention of Publitalia in Montecarlo, September 1994]

This is the reason why, for a long time, the label of "corporate party" resisted, because of the transposition of the corporate mindset to the party logics.

What escaped from analysts' attention was that Fininvest in particular was not a corporation as any other, but it was characterized by a total "Berlusconi-shaped mindset", with an evident absence of rules and established roles. There were not permanent appointments (or at least they were the minimal part), and everyone in Fininvest had to be elastic enough to follow the President in all of his ideas, reshaping continuously tasks and responsibilities.

It means that it was not Forza Italia to be managed following the classic corporate model, but it was both Berlusconi's companies and party to be run in an absolutely original way, reflecting in every aspect the personality of the leader.

Among the most convincing definitions which have been used in these years to describe Forza Italia, references can be made to the "catch-all party" (Kirchheimer 1966), given the heterogeneousness of the programs and the generality of references to values; "populist party" (Meny and Surel 2001), for the continuous appeal to the people, considered by the President the only source of legitimacy for democratic power (Mariotti 2008); "electoralist party" (Panebianco 1982; Gunther and Diamond 2002; Lanza and Piazza 2002), which considers the main role of the party into taking the President to government, and "charismatic party" (Panebianco 1982; Raniolo 2000; Poli 2001). This last definition perhaps qualifies the party more than any other: charisma implies the recognition of this

¹² Publitalia '80, the advertising concessionaire for Berlusconi's TV channels, organized the selection of the 276 candidates of Forza Italia in the uninominal collegiums for the House of Deputies and the Senate in 1994 elections.

¹³ "Publitalia didn't contribute to the electoral campaign of Forza Italia: Publitalia made the electoral campaign and created the strongest Italian party from nothing".

exceptional quality by the people in the group, and it's doubtless – as it emerges from the 50 interviews made – that Forza Italia members of Parliament consider themselves as being expression of such a party:

“Il nostro è un partito leaderistico, carismatico”¹⁴.

[a Member of Parliament, August 2007]

“Forza Italia è un partito dichiaratamente leaderistico, anche se ora si sta un po' strutturando. Cioè [per un candidato] conta che il tuo territorio ti gradisca, ma conta sempre l'opinione del leader carismatico”¹⁵.

[a Member of Parliament, July 2007]

In fact, to better understand Forza Italia it is important to analyze not only how the party was studied so far, but also how it is self-perceived by its leader and by its ruling class.

In 1994 the national coordinator of the time, Previti, launched – following a Berlusconi's idea – the “militants party”. He presented a Statute in which most of the elective offices were chosen at the base, involving clubs and members, through a system of primaries¹⁶. Nonetheless, not considering – neither him nor the President – the times mature for such a change, he froze the Statute in favor of a totally top-driven organization, through a number of top-down appointments which had always Berlusconi as last referee¹⁷.

¹⁴ “Ours is a leaderistic, charismatic party”.

¹⁵ “Forza Italia is an avowedly leaderistic party, even though now it is partly structuring itself; i.e. [for a candidate] it is important to be appreciated by the territory, but it is always important the charismatic leader's opinion”.

¹⁶ Following the division of Italian territory in 475 uninominal collegiums for the House of Deputies, the Statute provided a structuration having in the electoral collegiums its basic unit. In every collegium, through procedures of popular election with the involvement of club members and the registered electors of Forza Italia, the candidates should have been chosen. Primary elections, then, should have individuated the 475 candidates, who should have had the function of delegates for the collegiums, i.e. of party executives at the local level, in addition to the guarantee to participate to the national convention in the spring of 1995 for the election of the Presidency committee and of the executive group of the party.

¹⁷ The President appointed the members of the Presidency committee and the national coordinator; the latter, in agreement with the President, appointed the regional coordinators, who in their turn appointed their directive organs and the delegates for collegiums. Since December 1994, for a year, the membership drive was suspended, going

After the defeat in 1996, Berlusconi entrusted Scajola (appointed national coordinator) with the task of structuring Forza Italia in the territory. Scajola, through the 1997 Statute and the First Congress of 1998, managed to institutionalize the huge power of the leader, making all the strategic executive offices of the party be appointed by the President or by organs appointed by him, although he introduced some elements of internal democracy relating essentially to the local levels, up to the provincial coordinators.

“Teoricamente c’è democrazia fino al potere provinciale, ma è una democrazia, se si guarda anche allo statuto, con pochi poteri perché poi decide tutto dal coordinamento regionale in su - che è nominato dal leader”¹⁸.
[a Member of Parliament, March 2007]

Although Berlusconi wanted a more locally organized party in order to achieve better electoral performances at the local level, betting on candidates who could be expression of territories, he didn’t want to change the nature of his political creature, at all.

That is why, in 2000, at the Congress of Assago, he launched the “party of the people”:

“Cominciamo dunque i nostri lavori, i lavori di questo nostro partito che se volessimo definirlo come lo definirebbero gli studiosi di politica dovremmo chiamare un partito di valori e di programma. Se volessimo collocarlo geograficamente diremmo che è un partito di centro, il centro del sistema politico italiano. È un partito liberale, ma non elitario, anzi un partito liberaldemocratico popolare, è un partito cattolico ma non confessionale, è un partito laico ma non intollerante e laicista, è un partito nazionale ma non centralista. È insomma un partito che vuole darsi un nome molto semplice, e

against articles 2 and 3 of the January 18th Statute, and confirming Previti and Berlusconi’s preference for a party in which the executives, also from an organizational point of view, were the members of Parliament.

¹⁸ “In theory there is democracy up to the provincial level, but it’s a democracy, if we look at the Statute, with just a few powers, because afterwards everything is decided from the regional coordination to the top, and those are appointed by the leader”.

che per quello che pensiamo noi sarebbe lieto di essere chiamato in modo molto semplice: il partito della gente"¹⁹.

[Silvio Berlusconi, Congress of Assago, 2000]

Therefore, Forza Italia became a two-dimensions party: one, preponderant, of the "party of the people", in which it was enhanced the direct relationship – not mediated by any structure – between the leader and his people, managed autonomously by Berlusconi. The other, organizational, of the "non-party party", in which members of Parliament, for the first time, got into the structure of Forza Italia – holding executive roles (each of them was put to head a department) absolutely lacking authority – giving life to a "party of the only children", extremely less important for Berlusconi than the party of the people.

"[Un partito] che nasce da un leader carismatico che parla direttamente con la gente, bypassando ogni struttura di partito, compresi i dipartimenti - oggi io sono responsabile di un dipartimento - bypassando i dipartimenti, chiaramente necessita di un partito non partito. E' una scelta strategica, ma anche accettata da noi [parlamentari], perché questo è il partito della gente che ama Berlusconi e con un partito così il leader deve avere le mani libere"²⁰.

[a Member of Parliament, March 2007]

The party of the only children is so defined – by some Forza Italia Members of Parliament themselves – because of the inner dynamics which qualify it until the dissolution of the party into the PDL.

Its characteristics are essentially five:

1. Overlap between Parliamentary and party offices;

¹⁹ "Let's begin our works, the works of our party, whom we could call – as political scholars would – a 'party of values and of program'. If we had to collocate it geographically we'd say it is a Center party, the center of Italian political system. It's a liberal party, but not elitist, rather it's a liberal-democratic popular party; Catholic, but not confessional; laic, but not intolerant and 'laicist'; it's national party, but not centralist. To sum up it's party whose name is very simple, and which – for what we think – would be glad to be called in a very simple way: the party of the people".

²⁰ "[A party] which was born by a charismatic leader who talks directly to the people, bypassing every party structure, including departments – today I'm in charge of a department – bypassing the departments, clearly needs a 'non-party party'. It's a strategic choice, accepted by us [members of Parliament] as well, because this is the party of the people who love Berlusconi, and in a party like this the leader must have his hands free".

2. Selection of the candidates as personal choice of the leader;
3. Love towards the leader, who becomes like a father whom they don't want to disappoint;
4. Absolute trust in the leader;
5. Inexistent relationships between MPs.

As mentioned before, Forza Italia has always been characterized by an almost total overlap between the offices of Members of Parliament and party executives. This overlap has always been a precise choice of the leader for two main reasons. The first, of sheer economic character, relates to the lower expenses, which on the contrary turn into gain for the party. Berlusconi, instead of paying party executives, gives the offices directly to his MPs – gratifying them through prestigiously named role – and they, in addition to dedicating themselves passionately to curry the leader's favor, use as resources also their own assistants (paid as well by the State, accordingly with the benefits tied to Members of Parliament's status). In that way Berlusconi exploits State economic resources as they were his own patrimony, dispensing rewards (the office of national or European Member of Parliament, or of regional deputy) to his liking; without considering the objective advantage that the party receives from its elected officials at the various levels, that can be quantified to about 20% of their salaries ending directly to the party²¹.

The second reason which induced the leader to the overlap of offices is, instead, of political concern. Controlling his MPs – through the system of rewards which we will talk of below – Berlusconi controls directly also the party, so limiting the risk of internal oppositions which could curb his power.

The selection of candidates is perhaps the most interesting aspect which characterizes this peculiar party. The Statute analysis, in this case, is not sufficient, because the norms often are ignored in favor of praxis. The 1997 Statute, anyway, provided an almost total discretion, in the selection of candidates, for the leader and his Presidency committee, which make their choices on the base of the recommendations by the regional coordinators.

²¹ It must be said the overlap of offices, in recent years, became a common practice also for the other parties of the Italian political system (for instance as regards the habit of taking a percentage of the salary of elected officials), however much, in most cases, not as much as in Forza Italia.

Through in-depth interviews (in most cases they lasted more than one hour and a half) we managed to collect the direct experiences of the MPs and to reconstruct partially the dynamics of this fundamental passage.

Candidates seem to be chosen exclusively by the leader at his discretion, and they are indisputable.

They who wish to be candidate – in “safe positions”, considering the close party lists Italian electoral system – try in every way to establish a direct contact with the leader or with the national coordinator in the days before the commitment of the lists, in order to be reassured or to try to convince the President to be presented as candidates, even only to be sure he doesn't forget previous agreements. Some might even wait out of his house, looking for the best moment to approach him (after or before someone else).

Analyzing Forza Italia parliamentary class since 1994 up to now, we can observe how Berlusconi changed his criteria of choice with time. At the beginning he recruited eminent people from civil society coming from different professional sectors, characterized by their non-involvement with politics. Afterwards, with the appointment of Scajola as national coordinator, the followed criteria were mainly two: on the one hand, the recruitment of ex professional politicians, mostly of Christian Democratic (from which Scajola himself had come) and Socialist areas²²; on the other hand, the fidelity and the personal connection to the leader, in addition to the enhancement of qualities in the communication field (Lanza and Piazza 2002). In XV and XVI legislatures, the second criterion seems to prevail on the first, through major consideration of personal relationships and degree of fidelity shown to the leader.

What is particularly striking in the interviews made is the deep passion which most of MPs show towards their President. Berlusconi is deemed as the charismatic leader who allows people standing by him to rise, but it's not just that; every interviewee showed the desire to please the leader and not to disappoint him, just as with a parent. Their goal is to favor and help the leader as much as they can, and what they do both in the Parliament and in the party aims to reach this goal. The same structure of the party is run with enthusiasm not for internal

²² In XIV legislature over 60% of Forza Italia Members of Parliament (in both the House and the Senate) came from parties of the “First Republic”, and among them the Christian Democratic component was the most numerous (Lanza and Piazza 2002).

necessities of the executives or external necessities of electors, but to follow the wishes of the President.

“Cerchiamo di pensare a ciò che il leader ha potuto fare per tutti noi, cercando di dire cosa possiamo fare tutti noi per il leader! Quindi, ora, cercando di radicare il partito sul territorio, di renderlo visibile in tutti i comuni d’Italia, di dargli quel senso di democrazia di base, eleggendo tutti i rappresentanti e mantenendo l’aspetto verticista perché un leader è un leader e non si può cambiare, quindi democrazia larga e diffusa a livello comunale e provinciale e poi a stringere perché sennò poi non potrebbe funzionare”²³.

[a Member of Parliament, August 2007]

Each of the interviewees is aware to have a gratitude debt towards the President, and this gratitude ties them even more closely to him. The President has – or has had anyway – a direct relationship with each of them, nobody excluded. Berlusconi, despite his role, manages to take care of a staggering number of personal relations, gratifying every time his interlocutor.

Most of interviewees are aware to have a seat in Parliament just thanks to Berlusconi, not having – for an explicit want of Berlusconi, who privileges other criteria in the selection of candidates (see point 2) – a significant number of votes to present, or particularly evident qualities in order to justify their position.

“E’ l’unico caso al mondo in cui è il leader che porta i voti al partito, contrariamente a tutti gli altri leader di partito che sanno prendere i voti del partito. Gli altri partiti hanno loro i voti e diventa leader chi riesce a prendere più voti di questo partito. Da noi i voti sono di Berlusconi e questa è la vera anomalia”²⁴.

²³ “We try to think bearing in mind what the leader made for us all, trying to tell what we all can do for the leader. So, now, try to root the party in the territory, make it visible in all Italian municipalities, give it a sense of base democracy, electing all representatives and maintain the top-down design, because a leader is a leader and you cannot change that, so large and diffused democracy at the base on municipal and provincial levels, and then tightening, because otherwise it couldn’t work”.

²⁴ “It’s the only case in the world where the leader brings votes to the party, when all other leaders on the contrary can take votes from the party. Other parties have their own votes, and leader becomes who’s able to take most of these votes. In our party the votes are Berlusconi’s, and this is the true anomaly”.

[a Member of Parliament, March 2007]

The party of the only children characterizes itself also for the relationship of extreme trust which ties the MPs to the leader. Interviewees admit that they must have an elastic mindset to take in immediately the ideas of the leader, who – gifted with fantasy and geniality and having a direct relationship with the people – expresses his insights impromptu, usually in public, without a previous confrontation with the party. That is why the trust in the President is a fundamental characteristic. The parliamentary class is called to support the thoughts and the actions of the leader, often without having precise information and, sometimes, even not agreeing.

“Mi sono trovato numerosissime volte a sapere delle iniziative di Berlusconi dai giornalisti e a sostenerle senza neanche sapere di cosa si trattasse. In alcuni casi – me ne vergogno un po’ – ho difeso l’operato di Berlusconi pur disapprovandolo, perché credevo di doverlo difendere anche se aveva sbagliato perché le cose giuste che faceva erano talmente superiori a quelle sbagliate da poterlo giustificare”²⁵.

[a Member of Parliament, February 2009]

The direct relationship with the leader – who controls and decides everything – implies that MPs are not incentivized to develop a corps-spirit, a sense of common belonging. Each of them is convinced to have a special tie with Berlusconi, and for this reason they are in Forza Italia. Everyone refers directly to the President and, as a result, doesn’t need the others, with whom dynamics of jealousy often develop. The relationship which establishes between them is of coexistence, but not of cohabitation. Furthermore, the feeling which ties them to the leader is so strong that they tend to give vent to frustrations – maybe for a bad management of the party – on his close entourage – which has a very limited decisional power – rather than on the leader, who is always justified.

²⁵ “I found myself several times to know about Berlusconi’s initiatives from journalists and to support them without even knowing what it was about. In some cases – I’m a bit ashamed for that – I defended Berlusconi’s acts even disagreeing with that, as I felt I had to defend him although he was wrong, because the right things he did were so superior to the wrong ones to be able to justify him”.

In quel momento, non per volontà di Berlusconi, ma di Scajola si decise di trasformarlo [Forza Italia] in partito. Ma fu un errore. Di Scajola"²⁶.
[a Member of Parliament, July 2007]

"Se dicessi che va tutto bene, direi una fesseria! Soprattutto nelle ultime elezioni politiche con un sistema elettorale proporzionale sono state privilegiate le persone vicine all'apparato. Questo certo non per colpa di Berlusconi, ma per i suoi rappresentanti a livello regionale [i coordinatori regionali sono nominati da Berlusconi]; io sono una vittima di questo. Ma non per colpa di Berlusconi [...] è stato consigliato male!"²⁷.
[a Member of Parliament, August 2007]

It must be added that it is Berlusconi himself who doesn't incentivize the aggregative dynamics inside the party, avoiding for example the chance of creation of internal groups which would compel him to confront with the party, limiting, even partially, his power.

"Se lui avesse avuto i colonnelli, li richiamava ogni volta che c'era un problema e gli diceva 'Ooh!'. Ma se ciascuno di noi avesse potuto fare riferimento ad un colonnello invece di sentirsi tutti figli unici... Perché lui [Berlusconi] poi questo ha fatto. Ha creato il "partito della gente" e poi c'ha il "partito dei figli unici" e i figli unici non fanno famiglia!"²⁸.
[a Member of Parliament, March 2007]

From the interviews made, it is evident that every Forza Italia MP feels fully a "child" – proud of his father – of Berlusconi, but definitely not "brother" of his party colleagues, with whom he refuses to confront because he somehow prefers to ignore their existence.

²⁶ "In that moment, not for Berlusconi's will, but because of Scajola it was decided to transform [Forza Italia] into a party. But it was a mistake. Of Scajola".

²⁷ "If I said everything is all right, I would say something stupid! Above all in last political elections, with a proportional electoral system, people near to the apparatus have been privileged. This was definitely not Berlusconi's fault, but for his representatives at the regional level [regional coordinators are appointed by Berlusconi]; I am a victim of this. But it's not Berlusconi's fault [...] he has been badly advised!".

²⁸ "If he had had the colonels, he could recall them every time there was a problem saying: «Ooh!». But if each of us could have been able to refer to a colonel instead of feeling all only children... Because he [Berlusconi] did that. He created the 'party of the people', and then he has the 'party of the only children', and the only children don't make a family!".

Therefore Forza Italia's family is absolutely patriarchal and characterized by all "only children".

The crisis of the party of the only children: the Popolo della Libertà

The party of the only children – as explained in the previous paragraph – characterizes itself, among other things, for a direct tie of MPs/party executives to the leader and for the absence of consolidated connections and alliances with colleagues.

The Popolo della Libertà (PDL), born from the union of Forza Italia and Alleanza Nazionale (in addition to other small center-right groups), seems to change this picture, strongly promoted by Berlusconi, on which Forza Italia always based itself.

Through an analysis of the Statutes of the three parties (Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, Popolo della Libertà) it emerges how Berlusconi's party had a clearly predominant role as source of inspiration for the new Statute.

The charismatic character of PDL is more accentuated than in Forza Italia. The President's office, for instance, which in Forza Italia lasted three years, in the PDL does not have a term. There isn't any deadline.

To create most of the concerns, though, there are internal groups, considered by Mario Valducci a "heritage of ex-AN members"²⁹, and the relationship between the leader and the organization.

The debate on internal groups shed a light upon the difficult cohabitation between Gianfranco Fini and Berlusconi, and put Berlusconi's only children off their isolation, making them to fear this new reality which tries to gain space in the party. On January 27th 2010, Sandro Bondi, one of the three national coordinators, opened a debate on the pages of «Il Giornale», on which he expressed his concerns about the possible drift towards the consolidation of these internal groups in the PDL, and about the risk that they could turn Berlusconi's design, typical of Forza Italia, over.

"La mia preoccupazione, tuttavia, è che vi sono delle posizioni anche all'interno del nostro partito che non vanno, secondo me, nella direzione per

²⁹ Co-founder of Forza Italia and Member of Parliament. The quotation is reported in an interview published in «L'Opinione», February 4th 2010.

cui il presidente Silvio Berlusconi ha fondato prima Forza Italia e poi il Popolo della Libertà. [...]Sarebbe un errore e un curioso paradosso se, in coincidenza del punto più alto della sua forza politica e del grado di consenso di cui gode nel Paese, una certa nomenclatura politica si sentisse abilitata a fare da sé, a rivendicare un'autonomia che getta un'ombra sul futuro"³⁰.
[Sandro Bondi , «Il Giornale», January 27th 2010]

The debate continued with the interventions of various MPs (mostly of the Forza Italia area), among which the ex national coordinator Cicchitto, who threatened, against the AN dissidents, to create – if necessary – a huge internal group of ex Forza Italia members ready to isolate them; and Scajola, who declared himself against these internal groups, but in favor of a party which “makes Berlusconi’s charismatic leadership to cohabitate with an organization of members, rooted in the territory and open to the lively contributions of electors”³¹.

Besides the problem of internal groups³², Berlusconi knows that PDL is living a crucial phase of its history, and is aware that his control on the party is not total and undisputable as it was in Forza Italia.

The launch of “Paladini della Libertà” (“Paladins of Freedom”) is a first answer to the power games inside the PDL, manifesting themselves also in the abnormal proliferation of associations and foundations. But the day of reckoning seems near, and after the regional elections of March 2010, Berlusconi could re-establish vigorously the structure of the party of the only children.

³⁰ “My concern, though, is that there are some positions also inside our party, which, in my opinion, don’t go in the direction for which the President Silvio Berlusconi founded Forza Italia firstly and then the Popolo della Libertà. [...] It would be a mistake and a curious paradox if, in coincidence of the highest point of its political strength and consent which it enjoys in the country, a certain political nomenclature felt allowed to do on its own, to claim an autonomy which puts a shadow on the future”.

³¹ «Il Giornale», February 5th 2010.

³² Bruno Murgia, deputy of PDL, ex member of AN, talks of three main internal groups inside PDL. The first is tied to Fini, willing to build a right post-ideological European party; the second gathers the so-called “Bismarckiani”, which put together Giulio Tremonti, Maurizio Sacconi, Gianni Alemanno and others, around the idea of a popular party with a special Catholic inspiration; the third, composed of all those strictly connected to Berlusconi (Gasparri, Quagliariello, Verdini, etc.).

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APPENDIX

Interviewed Members of Italian Parliament

DEPUTIES

On. Maria Teresa Armosino
On. Simone Baldelli
On. Isabella Bertolini
On. Mara Carfagna
On. Gabriella Carlucci
On. Giuseppe Cossiga
On. Benedetto Della Vedova
On. Manuela Di Centa
On. Luigi Fabbri
On. Gregorio Fontana
On. Daniele Galli
On. Elisabetta Gardini
On Sestino Giacomoni
On. Francesco Maria Giro
On. Giorgio Lainati
On. Luigi Lazzari
On. Mistrello Destro
On. Gabriella Mondello
On. Osvaldo Napoli
On. Antonio Palmieri
On. Patrizia Paoletti Tangheroni
On. Paola Pelino
On. Guglielmo Picchi
On. Mauro Pili
On. Dario Rivolta
On. Massimo Romagnoli
On. Iole Santelli
On. Angelo Santori
On. Angelo Maria Sanza
On. Giorgio Simeoni
On. Roberto Tortoli
On. Mario Valducci
On. Denis Verdini

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Sen. Mario Ferrara

Sen. Antonio Gentile

Sen. Cosimo Izzo

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Sen. Gaetano Quagliariello

Sen. Maurizio Sacconi

Sen. Giorgio Celio Stracquadanio

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